

Argentine artist Leiva's sculpture and paintings are visionary

By Steve Bennett | May 13, 2014 | Updated: May 13, 2014 6:13pm



Photo: Courtesy Photo

IMAGE 1 OF 4

One of three panels from Leiva's triptych "1+1+1" at Southwest School of Art.

SAN ANTONIO — Feverishly fantastical, verging on surreal, Nicolás Leiva's art — dreamscape drawings and paintings teeming with a personal codex of symbols and magical, mystical works in clay — is an abundantly fertile mix of the sensual and the spiritual.

“My work is about my life, my family, my religion,” said the 53-year-old Argentine artist, who has lived in Miami since 1990. “This is my view of paradise.”

Two just-opened exhibitions offer a glimpse into that sublime world.

“Nicolás is a positive artist,” said Patricia Ruiz-Healy, owner of Ruiz-Healy Art in Olmos Park, where “Infinite Cycle Under Fire” features Leiva's ceramic works dating back to the '90s, including a must-see installation of vessels holding live orchids titled “Hanging Gardens of Babylon.” “He thinks up, not down.”

Downtown at the Southwest School of Art, “Infinite Cycle” features Leiva's visionary drawings and large-scale paintings, including the 24-foot-long tour de force “Sala da Pranzo,” which gives new meaning to the term “mind-blowing” — think psychedelia, think William Blake.

“We chose the title 'Infinite Cycle' because it reflects Nicolás' subject matter and personal convictions,” said Paula Owen, president of the school of art. “His work is an expression of how deeply he thinks about things — human relationships, social problems, the magnificence found in nature, and our place in the cosmos.”

Older clay works at Ruiz-Healy include decorated boxes that resemble reliquaries, which Leiva calls “containers for your secrets, dreams, wishes,” based on the Santería practice of “placing evils in a box.”

Other urns and bowls with lids, decorated with egg forms, flower shapes and bird wings in saturated colors and gold, reflect the artist's reverence for nature with organic clarity.

What's amazing is that Leiva was a painter who only took up sculpture in the late '90s; he lives part of the year in Faenza, Italy, where he creates works in clay at the renowned Bottega Gatti studios, founded in 1928 by sculptor Riccardo Gatti.

“In his generation in Argentina, Leiva has no equal in sheer originality and power, and few rivals in Latin America or elsewhere,” Cuban-American critic and poet Ricardo Pau-Llosa has written.

That's high praise, but it doesn't seem exaggerated when you see Leiva's paintings, which must be viewed from afar and inspected up close.

These nonlinear narratives — full of symbols such as houses and other architectural platforms, boats, trees and other plant forms— are, as Owen puts it in a catalog essay, “both whimsical and menacing.”

“Landscape and architecture borrow elements inherent to each — trees and gardens become urban in complexity, while buildings and cities acquire the flux and breadth of entire ecosystems or galaxies,” she wrote.

Owen was introduced to Leiva's “unusual” work at the Ruiz-Healy gallery, which has represented the artist for several years. She said several pieces “worked their way into my mind so powerfully” that she decided to curate a major exhibition at the school of art.

Owen put her finger on Leiva's work when she said, “To experience Nicolás' ideas and stories takes us out of our day-to-day mindset.”

For an artist with such an original vision, Leiva is remarkably down to earth.

“My life is very simple,” he said. “I get up in the morning, have my tea, then go into the studio and work. I might take a siesta in the afternoon or go to the beach. I have an incredible family. I am blessed.”

*“Infinite Cycle” is on exhibit through July 6
in the Russell Hill Rogers Galleries at the
Southwest School of Art, 300 Augusta St., and Ruiz-Healy Art, 201 E. Olmos St.*



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